

## Health After Head and Neck Radiation Therapy

Radiation therapy can cause long-term side effects. It can affect your day-to-day function and quality of life. Sometimes, a specialist may need to assess and treat side effects. Here are some things that you can do to help prevent problems or keep them from getting worse.

### **Stretching**

Neck and jaw stiffness can develop at any point after you finish radiation. It may worsen over time. Stretching your neck and jaw muscles daily helps to lessen the scar tissue that forms in these areas after radiation. It also helps you to maintain range of motion in these joints. Ask your care team for a list of stretches

### **Dental Hygiene**

Your teeth are at risk for tooth decay after radiation, due to less saliva and a decrease in blood supply to the jawbone. Fluoride treatments can help reduce the risk of cavities and dental decay. The care team suggests that you use fluoride treatments every day, such as fluoride trays or prescription-strength fluoride toothpaste, to help protect your teeth on a lifelong basis. Also, it is important that you see your dentist every 6 months for a dental check-up and cleaning.

### **Swallowing Exercises**

Difficulty swallowing is a common problem after radiation. Sometimes, doing routine swallowing exercises can help maintain function and prevent it from getting worse over time. These exercises may have been reviewed with you at the time of your radiation. The care team can refer you to the Speech Pathology department if swallowing has become a problem for you.

### **Exercise**

Regular exercise can help improve strength, reduce pain and fatigue, and improve mental and physical health for cancer survivors. It can also decrease the risk of the cancer coming back or developing a second cancer. The American College of Sports Medicine recommends 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week.

### **Tobacco Cessation**

Cancer survivors have an increased risk of recurrence and a second primary cancer if they continue to smoke or use tobacco products. Tobacco use is related to lung, esophagus, bladder, kidney, liver, pancreas, colon, and rectum cancers, as well as leukemia. Smoking also increases the risk of osteoradionecrosis – a condition that affects the jawbone. Quitting tobacco can have instant health benefits, even if you have used it for a long time. Talk with your care team about resources to help you quit.

## **Cancer Screening**

Your skin is more sensitive after radiation therapy and you should see a dermatologist for a yearly skin screening to help look for any abnormal skin lesions. It is also important to have other routine cancer screenings, such as a mammogram and Pap smear for women, prostate screening for men, and colorectal screening for all patients. You may qualify for lung cancer screening if you have a history of smoking. Talk with your care team about which cancer screenings are appropriate for you.